

National Identity of Thailand: The Role of King and Buddhism

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Introduction

Identity is the most important part of politics when we deal about conflict. Many of the conflict started from the difference of identity among the people of a country. Thailand is one of some nations that we can say as a homogenous nation. Based on the power of King and the single religion, (which is Buddhism), Thailand step up as a strong economic country in Southeast Asia. In spite of the impressive economic growth, Thailand suffered some political trouble. The rapid shift of government and insurgencies at south part still arise as political burden. And just like the old times, King's role and state religion play important part as national identity to save national political condition.

The National Identity

Many of Thailand's or Thai's people regard them selves as a servant of The King. Bhumipol Adulyadej, the King of Thai has stay on the throne for more than sixty years, and no one of the Thai has ever doubt about the King's right to rule the country, and also to decide personal life of the people. King is the central life for Thai's people. He is the one that where everybody should aiming at for the purpose of life. Thais will be very proud if they can do something for the King. Touching King's body will be honored just as winning the lottery. Seeing the King's face is like having a great gift. Working in the Royal palace also considered as a great virtue. They will do everything for King and the King's will even if they're not getting paid.

Moving around the city and also in the suburb we will find the picture everywhere. Office, hotel, houses are filled with King's picture. It is also happened in the district and in the village. Even in the remote area, in the uphill of Chiangdao region in the villages of Lahu, Lisu and Akha we will see the Kings picture hanging on the wall. Of course, most of the people who live there never see the King himself, and some of them didn't ever come to Bangkok.

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Implying the people of Thai are the Thai ethnic does not change the fact about the support. King Bhumipol doesn't appear very often in public, but once he got out from the Palace, and once he speak, all the Thai will listen and obey every single word spoken. There's no different between the rich and the poor, the high class and low class, cities and villages, politician and followers, capitalist and labor, or even the priest, they just do what have been said. King is the gracious one. He brings the wealth to the nation and all of the people of Thai. King is the natural spring that gives water for human and creature all over the mountain. They believe, The King is The Thai itself.

Compare to Indonesia, of course it much different. Not all Indonesian people supports SBY's government. Claiming SBY come from Javanese ethnic does not change the fact that not all Javanese support him also. One might say SBY not comes from the Royal family, but considering Sultan Hamengku Buwono X only has small portion of Javenese to be ruled to, will tell us The King of Thai has more power, more legitimacy over support from his people. People of Thai identify them selves as people of King.

Buddhism in Thai

Religion of Thailand is Buddha. Buddha or Buddhism as we said, has a teaching that human are not created to fulfil all his need in this planet. Some have to take care about others. Live is just temporary. Buddha is forever. The satisfaction of life is not how to get physical needs, it is how we generate comfort with something immaterial, something other than food, sex, power, money, and else that will diminish the real spirit of human, the spirit of Buddha.

Buddhist monks in Thailand are well honored everywhere and by everyone. We can see them barely foot walking around the city or just wearing slippers. Everybody just pay respect to the monks no matter what rank the monk is. If you see the bald head and yellow and orange sheet strips on the body and shoulder of one person you've pay some respect to them, even if they're not asking for it. Monastery perhaps is the place full of wealth, but monks are not living to take pleasure from that, they're just living the simple life, without any luxury around them.

That's why Buddhist monks are welcome everywhere in Thailand. And since everybody have the same view, the same opinion and the thought about them; people in Thai share the same value and the same identity that honored Buddhist monks. Perhaps many of them didn't practice the teaching of religion very well, but honoring monks is another thing. This is the main idea, the main thing that can bind them together to be become one Thai.

Compare to Indonesia, we also have a major religion, which Islam. We also have so many Kyai as religious figure. But some just didn't work here in Indonesia. There are too many groups inside Islamic religion, which bring friction to the identity of Moslem itself. Now you can't say you're Moslem just by wearing a Moslem shirt because other groups of Moslem wouldn't say so. Mean while, some groups will insist that you have to wear a Moslem shirt to state you are a Moslem. We also can see that some of the Kyais are live in prosper, while the other are not. Some of them also busy with political

matters while the other only taking care about religious problem. There are some distinctions between religious figure from Java and from other than Java. So this kind of figure can not become the role model of people all together, thus people can't identify themselves as one. The identity of the people subordinates to one kyai is depend on the kyai himself as part of religious figure which can be very different form one another.

Identity problem in Thailand

As we learn from Thailand, King and Buddhism are so important to everyday life and also in political matter. Prime Minister of Thailand Abbishit Vejjajiva can't work his duty without King's bless. The General Sonthi Bunyaratkalin did not coup very well if the King react the other way. Political matters are not the big problem in Thailand, not either the economic matters. But in another area of Thailand as Pattani, we know not all the problems are solved. The different ethnic people of Malay still live at the south part of Thailand. With a population almost 600.000, Pattani become one of the insurgence powers in Thailand. They believe that they have another King, even more the practice another religion which is Islam. Chinese Ethnic perhaps has acculturated in Thai's people, but not the Malay ethnic. Chinese Ethnic also practices Buddhism, while Malay does not. Pattani's people just realize that they're not part of Thai ethnic.

Government of Thailand made some laws to assimilate Pattanis into Thai culture. They urge Pattanis to live like Thai does. They recommend Pattanis to marry Thai people, and they push Pattanis to change their name into Thai's name. Even, they manage the school system of Pattani to run like school of Thai. So, whether you like it or not, you will turn to Thai.

Many of the scholars believe that it's not about the policy of government who turn Pattanis into Thai; it's about the Kings figure and also the Buddhist monks. Pattanis see the King himself very charismatic and recognize him as a ruler. Even in their Islamic religion tell people to respect the ruler, the good ruler. So if the King can keep he justice, wealth and peace, he must be followed. He must be obeyed.

On the other side, the Buddhist monks always appear humble, just like Islamic teaching about life. They help people while never asking help from others. They live simple, never come up arrogant as if they rule everything on earth base on God's will. They never show up like they have the power on religious matter and tell people what to do and what is not. In these ways, all people love Buddhist monks including the Pattanis in the south. The insurgencies then stay out from the people in common. They have only few supports. It's only arms smuggling that keep the insurgencies alive. It's only the matter of political will of another government not so support rebellion in Thai, not to interfere Thai's domestic political matters.

Conclusion

King's legitimacy and Buddhism still play major part of Thailand's politics. The role of both saves many political troubles in Thailand. There is no such political obstacle that cannot be coped with these two main instruments in Thailand's politic. Political

coup, economic crisis or even insurgencies are easily terminated. This likely can be a sample for another country such as Indonesia.

Legitimacy of the ruler and religion itself do not come as taken for granted. Kings need to show his attention to the people, showing his grace showing his mercy. It not merely about the power, about to tell people to do something, or just being obeyed by the people, it is about awareness and consideration and affection to the people.

Just like the King, Buddhist monks and the religion are well accepted because they show how humble they are. Helping people without hoping any reward, do as what religions told, and never use religious matter as a way to get a political power.